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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

Sunday, September 3, 2023

Proper 17, Year A, Revised Common Lectionary Track 1

[Exodus 3:1-15](#)

[Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c](#)

[Romans 12:9-21](#)

[Matthew 16:21-28](#)

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It was Yogi Berra, the ballplayer and wit, who famously said, “You can observe a lot just by watching.”

Moses was keeping his father-in-law’s flock when he happened to notice an unusual sight. “I must turn aside,” he says, “and look at this great sight.” There’s a rabbinic story that suggests maybe the burning bush had always been there, blazing there in the wilderness for all eternity, but Moses was the first one who happened to notice it. And so he met God.

God in a flame of fire that never goes out, a fire that blazes without destroying. A profound image for God, a God who is a flame of love that never goes out, a flame that is both fierce and gentle, a flame that purifies and burns out every trace of evil in us and in creation, yet in whom there is no hint of violence, whose will for us is joy and peace and life. And a God of mystery, a God whose ways are unknowable to us, a God who sees fit to hang out here in the wilderness simply blazing in a bush until the right moment when Moses will happen by.

We wouldn't have expected this to be the way Israel gets liberated from slavery. Here the people of God are crying out under brutal oppression. They are poor, they are working night and day for their enslavers, and their situation seems hopeless. Maybe some of the Israelites had an idea about what needed to happen: a revolution, an uprising, perhaps; or maybe a gentler transition, a change in Pharaoh, more humane leadership, better laws and regulations in Egyptian society. I doubt anyone expected their salvation would come from a surprise encounter with the living God in a glowing bush in the desert. But that's what happens, because God is a God of surprises.

And it turns out that God is the one who has been watching. "I have observed my people's misery," God says to Moses. Yes, Moses is observant enough to turn aside and gaze at this strange sight. Moses' paying attention matters. But what matters more is that God has been paying attention all along. God sees what has been happening to the people, the injustice, the tears. And God is going to act—and it will change everything. It will change Moses' life forever, sending him to blow past all his fears and excuses, to confront Pharaoh face to face, and to become the reluctant but transformed leader of the Israelites. It will change all their lives forever, catapulting them out of the brutal yet at least predictable reality of enslaved life in Egypt and into a wilderness journey with many twists and turns before the promised land. It will change Pharaoh's and the Egyptians' lives, with plagues and sorrows ahead, a great reckoning for a people that had built their prosperity on the backs of those they exploited. Yes, things are about to change, and not because Moses has all the answers, but because God is watching, and God is about to act, and Moses is just observant enough to let himself get swept up in what God is doing.

And I find myself wondering what that blazing fire of fierce passion, fierce anger at injustice, and fierce love for you and me and all of creation sees today, and how God is preparing to act, just as God has been acting through all of time, not in the ways anyone generally expects. I look at our world and I see so many problems that seem absolutely intractable, a world that feels stuck: a brutal, grinding war in Ukraine; a world marching further and further down the path of drastic climate change; a nation reckoning and failing to reckon with the ways our prosperity has been built on the backs of those it exploits, and descending seemingly year by year into greater cruelty and dismissal of one another. And I wonder: what does God make of us? And what is God planning to make out of us?

This is the God who acted by bringing a ragged band of escapees across the Red Sea into freedom, the God who acted by setting the people of Israel free from their exile in Babylon, the God who acted most fully of all in a wandering teacher in Galilee who gathered a little group of followers, who angered those in power and got himself crucified, and whose new and risen life has been spreading through the world ever since as his friends, like Moses, have responded to God's call to share the good news.

We live in a time when there is a lot of handwringing in church circles about the future of church. This is handwringing I often participate in and feel, as our society is increasingly secular, as people find less and less reason to participate in organized faith communities, and those of us who love and live in those organized faith communities worry about diminishing resources and diminishing participation and diminishing relevance. But the thing is, either God is real or God isn't. If God isn't, then we may as well roll up this whole thing anyway.

And if God is, then the truth is it doesn't depend on us. God is not affected by popularity contests and God isn't a prisoner of institutions or limited resources. God can change the world from a burning bush. God is watching. God is acting. And like Moses, God is more than willing to invite us to join in.

It will change our lives, and not in an easy way. We may find ourselves speaking boldly to Pharaohs or to our own people. We may find ourselves naming injustice or strengthening the discouraged or striking out into the desert. We may not know the paths ahead of us beyond the next step. But we have God's promise "I will be with you," the only promise that really matters.

God's love is still blazing and will never go out. Are our eyes open to see it? Will we turn aside and notice? Where will we be sent?